Has the Cold War Affected the United States' Position on the Kashmir?

By Aaron Zimmer

The Kashmiri region has been disputed since the independent countries of India and Pakistan were created in 1947. This area has been the source of much tension and conflict over the years, and has caused relations between India and Pakistan to deteriorate on multiple occasions. Relations sank to such lows at times that major conflict seemed inevitable, and several conflicts between the two nations have occurred. Most recently cross border tensions resulted in gunfire in January 2013. A Pakistani soldier was killed by Indian forces after crossing the border in February 2013 while a Pakistani sniper reportedly killed an Indian officer in June. Yet, the position of the United States is not widely known by its citizens nor as widely publicized as other disputed areas such as those involving Israel and its neighbors. Additionally, the United States does not appear to have taken a definitive stance on the issue despite the existence of groups in the region which could be rightly classified as terrorist.

The issue of the Kashmir is important not because of the region itself, but because the dispute involves two nations of strategic interest to the United States. The United States viewed Pakistan as a crucial cold war ally, while the non-aligned nation of India was seen as more friendly to the Soviet Union and thus wasn’t a strategic partner to the U.S. This paradigm began to change following the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the increasing power and prestige of China. In order to gain a buttress against China, the United States began to seek a closer partnership with India. A question that then arises is what impact the Cold War era relationships have on the current United States position on the Kashmir.

If the view of the Kashmiri dispute is framed by Cold War-era perceptions, there is a danger of either missing changed realities within the region brought on by the passage of time, or having previous priorities form the basis of current actions. In either case, the United States may find itself caught off-guard by events involving two of the nations which are most critical to regional stability and long-term U.S. goals. By examining the history with both nations since independence from the British, one may be able to determine the U. S. position on Kashmir vis-à-vis the closeness of relationships.

Identifying changes in the U.S. position on Kashmir over time can provide a useful determination if the current position is affected by any previously formed biases. These biases could result in incorrect assumptions of Indian or Pakistani attitudes or intentions in the region. These assumptions may result in missed opportunities to engage both nations. Biases could also result in the U.S. holding to an untenable position or one at odds with regional partners. Finally, incorrect assumptions could result in missing the expansion of terrorist organizations into what originally was dispute over the partition of nations.
Background

It is necessary to briefly examine the history of the region in order to understand the tension that exists between India and Pakistan generally, specifically regarding the Kashmiri region. The roots of this tension are not to be found in events that have occurred over the past decade or even wholly during the Cold War. Rather, tensions have existed for hundreds of years prior to the colonization of the region and the eventual partitioning that resulted in the creation of the modern nations of India and Pakistan. For over 800 years, Hindus and Muslims had been at odds over the subcontinent. [1] Map 1 shows the general distribution by religion that existed during the heyday of the British Raj with pink representing Hindu, Green Muslim, and Yellow Buddhist.

Upon the granting of independence, the British allowed the 565 princely states and British territories to decide to become part of India or Pakistan. Map 2 shows the patchwork combination of British India proper along with the Indian states. What made the Kashmir region unique in India was the existence of a Muslim majority population ruled by a Hindu king. In many ways, the resulting experience in the Kashmir region is representative of the entire region as the ethnic groups vied for control of the soon to be created India. Those Hindus that were working towards one India with a Muslim minority were anxious to finally have a chance to reverse hundreds of years of humiliation they felt was a result of previous acts, and an opportunity to exert political control over the Muslims for the first time.

Map 2: India Before Partition. Source: British Library

The overall history of the India-Pakistani partition is beyond the scope of this paper and therefore will not be explored outside of events that are germane to the Kashmiri problem. When independence from Britain resulted in a separate India and Pakistan (composed of east and west portions), the king of the Kashmiri region, Maharaja Hari Singh, elected to join neither India nor Pakistan in an attempt to vie for an independent state status for Kashmir which resulted in a “standstill” agreement to maintain the existing situation until formal resolution. As the Kashmir had a Muslim majority, the newly formed Pakistan was eager to incorporate it into its borders and sent armed tribesman into the region to force annexation. This had the effect of Singh signing accession to India in order to thwart the Pakistani efforts to forcibly annex Kashmir, and to secure Indian protection of the region. The resulting conflict in which Indian forces entered the Kashmir to evict Pakistani forces was ended by a United Nations ceasefire with what later became known as the Line of Control separating the Kashmir into Indian Jammu and Kashmir, and Pakistani Azad and Northern Territories portions. This resulted in a near-constant state of tension.
between two nations in a region where superpowers had strategically vital interests. Map 3 shows the created states of India and Pakistan, as well as the Kashmir region which has been a source of tension ranging from minor irritation to all out war between the two nations.

Map 3: The Kashmir.

Source: University of Texas

The situation has progressed to the point where India believes losing the Kashmir will make it vulnerable to further separatist movements and allow for radicalization of Indian Muslims, and any Pakistani leader who advocates less than total support for Kashmiri separatism is doomed to political downfall.\[ix\] By comparing Map 1 and Map 3, one can see that the Kashmir region straddles the historical boundaries of Hindu and Muslim regions of British India.

Cold War-era American interaction with India and Pakistan

Tensions brought about by the growing Cold War between the Soviet Union and western nations, particularly the United States, impacted relations with India and Pakistan immediately after those two nations gained independence from the British in 1947. The complexity of the issue and changing strategic realities led researcher Parama Palit to note that “The hallmark of the US policy on Kashmir has been its inconsistency”.\[x\] The reason for this may lie in the competing interests the United States has faced since the Cold War began.

As the Cold War intensified and British India transitioned to the states of India and Pakistan, United States’ views appear to have been influenced by British thinking since they were the dominant power in the subcontinent. A former British Indian foreign secretary opined that once the British control of the region waned, an alternative center of power was needed to replace it.\[xi\] This was especially true in order to counter rising Soviet influence. Due to the British experience in World War II with India’s geo-strategic importance as a base for operations, the British desired to form a partnership with a nation that was formed out of British India; Pakistan was the desirable country to form a partnership with due to the
fact that more areas of strategic importance at the time fell within proximity to Pakistan than they did to India.[xii] Cultivating a Pakistani alliance in order to provide a bulwark against Soviet expansion and create an ally for support in future confrontations, the British went so far as to push the United States to repudiate Indian ownership of the Kashmir and openly side with Pakistan through a recognition of the validity of claims to the Kashmir.[xiii]

While the United States did not go so far as to support Pakistani claims to the Kashmir, it did increase support and interaction with the country. An alliance with Pakistan was extremely important to the United States and became a priority, especially given the Indian position of neutrality in the Cold War that was highlighted by a policy of non-alignment and ultimately pro-Soviet attitude.[xiv] India initially moved from a neutral to pro-Soviet position out of need. The United Nations (UN) position on the dispute over the Kashmir was worded in a way to indicate that Pakistan had a legitimate claim, rather than concurring with India’s position that Pakistan had committed an armed aggression to seize a portion of Indian territory.[xv] The UN position was seen as being the result of United States influence, and was to the benefit of Pakistan which was able to claim the UN statement as a claim of legitimacy over the region.[xvi] The apparent support of Pakistani claims to the Kashmir coupled with increasing military aid and attention paid to the country by the United States, served to alienate India from the west and make Soviet influence possible in India.[xvii]

The increasing relationship between India and the Soviet Union caused the west much concern. The United States viewed India’s non-alignment policy as a ruse to disguise its support of the Soviet Union, a position which Secretary of State Dulles described as “an immoral and short-sighted conception” which would result in the Indians succumbing to Communism.[xviii] For some time, the result was that the United States pursued closer a closer relationship with Pakistan while India pursued an independent course which was often at odds with American foreign policy aims.[xix] Relations with India were further strained by Indian acquisition of nuclear weapons. Even with this situation, the United States made several attempts to settle the Kashmir dispute. In order to support Pakistan, the United States attempted to encourage a settlement to the dispute through a plebiscite, a position that India is not inclined to support due to its belief that the Kashmir is a part of India, and any ending of the tensions is a matter for India and Pakistan alone.[xx]

Over time, the United States realized the Kashmir issue was as important an issue to India and Pakistan as the Cold War was to the Americans and western power. That fact along with the unwillingness of Pakistan or India to support the United States in Vietnam led to a general disengagement in the region.[xxi] While the United States maintained relations with both countries, a period emerged when the United States paid little attention to either and played both sides of the fence, first by appearing to support Pakistan’s position during the 1971 India-Pakistan war, and then by appearing to support India during the 1999 Kargil conflict.[xxii]

Support for Pakistan waxed and waned over the years. A close relationship during the early years of the Cold War thawed until the United States needed Pakistani assistance to thwart the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only to thaw again amid the buildup of a Pakistani nuclear arms program until the United States once again needed Pakistani assistance in counter-terrorism operations after 9/11.[xxiii] Likewise, engagement with India was seen originally as an off-shoot of the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. The United States decided to try to improve relations with India in order to counter growing Chinese influence in the region.[xxiv] An indication of the subtle shift towards India and away from Pakistan was evident by the United States’ support for a bilateral solution to the Kashmiri problem as opposed to a plebiscite.[xxv] On the surface, the shift may seem small, but it is larger when viewed through the lens of Indian-Pakistani relations in that a plebiscite would likely favor Pakistan due to the
Muslim population majority while bilateral negotiations would likely favor India.

Today’s Environment

The United States-India-Pakistan relationship is complicated by current events. The United States is actively pursuing a global counter-terrorism policy and needs the assistance of Pakistan, while simultaneously needing a closer relationship with India as a means to counter growing Chinese influence in the region. It would appear as if relations with Pakistan would have deteriorated if not for the 9/11 attacks which resulted in the United States need for Pakistani cooperation in the hunt for terrorists and invasion of Afghanistan.\[xxvi\] The result is the current relationship between Pakistan and the United States is focused almost entirely on security concerns, while the relationship with India has been building over a number of years and focuses on economic, cultural, and energy programs as well as security issues. \[xxvii\]

The challenge with taking any position on the Kashmir is how to remain neutral, and build relations with India without sacrificing the relationship with Pakistan. \[xxviii\] The current position of the United States is detailed in the response given by President Obama in response to a reporter’s question at a joint press conference in New Dehli, India in 2010:

> With respect to Kashmir, obviously this is a longstanding dispute between India and Pakistan. As I said yesterday, I believe that both Pakistan and India have an interest in reducing tensions between the two countries. The United States cannot impose a solution to these problems, but I’ve indicated to Prime Minister Singh that we are happy to play any role that the parties think is appropriate in reducing these tensions. That’s in the interests of the region, it’s in the interests of the two countries involved, and it’s in the interests of the United States of America.\[xxix\]

This would indicate support for India since that nation has long held that outside countries play no role in settling a Kashmiri dispute, despite Pakistani requests for an American role in negotiations. \[xxx\]

Has This Position Been Influenced By Perceptions Formed During the Cold War?

It is unlikely that the United States’ current position is influenced by Cold War perceptions of India and Pakistan; however, the position during the Cold War was a result of biases formed during the time. A more likely explanation is that which is written by Dr. Sharif Shuja who said in response to a claim of a pro-Pakistani American position, “But a close examination of U.S. policy in the past and present would reveal that the United States is neither pro-Pakistan nor pro-India, it is only pro-America”. \[xxxi\] This would explain the vacillating relationships and support shown by the United States for India and Pakistan from 1947 to today.

It is also likely that current United States policy is a result not of perceptions formed during the Cold War, but rather influenced by a foreign policy which has grown beyond them to reflect the shift from a single enemy in the Soviet Union to the current world of multiple threats. The previously quoted statement of John Dulles would indicate an imperial image of India, where he appeared incredulous that the colony (India) would dare to have independent aims and views different than those of the great imperial power (United States).\[xxxii\] The current relationship has changed to one where the United States views the relationship with India no longer solely in relation to other nations, but as one of peers. \[xxxiii\] This would indicate that the United States holds a less of an imperial power bias view of India that was prevalent during the cold war, and now views the relationship as one more framed within a strategic intent
framework. Furthermore, the increasing closeness of India to the Soviet Union was seen as being the result of an ideological belief rather than one of necessity. This view of India during the Cold War may have been from a form of assimilation effect, where countries with an attraction to Communism were expected to improve relationships with the Soviet Union, but no nation would have improving relationships with the Soviet Union if they were not drawn to Communism.[xxxiv]

The view of Pakistan has shifted from one of a trusted ally to one that is close approaching that of a rogue state with nefarious aims, inability to secure its borders, and controlled by enemies as evidenced by the perceived lack of progress in fighting terrorism, and government support of terrorist organizations.[xxxv] This is not a new view of Pakistan, for President Clinton informed then military dictator General Pervez Musharraf that the country was, in the words of Shehzad Qazi, “…increasingly becoming an international pariah”. [xxxvi] The complete turning of relationships that has occurred is evidenced by the words used by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who portrayed the relationship between the United States and India as “an affair of the heart”, and then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta who portrayed the relationship between the United States and Pakistan as “complicated, but necessary”. [xxxvii] These statements would indicate that current United States policy is driven less by Cold War views and more by a realpolitik view of the world.

Conclusion

India and Pakistan are both countries of strategic interest to the United States. The long running dispute over the Kashmir region has complicated relationships and led to war on multiple occasions. The United States has had differing positions on the dispute over the years, and currently holds that India and Pakistan are responsible for solving it. Given the United States-India-Pakistan Cold War relationships, it would be reasonable to conclude that biases formed by the United States during that time continue to influence current views; however, this would not appear to be the case. The relationships between the United States and India and Pakistan appear to be framed more by current strategic importance and less by Cold War perceptions. As such, the United States has attempted to strike a balanced, neutral position on the Kashmir where India and Pakistan are ultimately responsible for ending the tension. This will likely remain the United States’ approach unless the situation deteriorates to a point where the tensions between India and Pakistan are damaging the nation’s strategic interests, or the region attracts large numbers of multinational terrorists posing a direct threat to the United States.

This essay contains the author’s own views and does not represent the views of the Department of Homeland Security or the Coast Guard.

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